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ABSTRACT

An author's school visits can be, to a degree, part of an author's workplace depending on how many visits an author undertakes during a year. From the perspective of an author, the visits need to be fulfilling in terms of feeling valued and respected. From the school's point of view, it would appear that the visit is deemed a success if the author enthuses the students to read, explains the set text, expounds on where he/she gets ideas, or assists with the students' creative writing. This paper offers "inside information" about what authors think and how they assess a successful visit. The paper provides key research questions, subsidiary questions, ideas about selecting the authors, and examples of four authors' narratives about their "dream schools" and their "nightmare schools." (NKA)

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Authors in Schools: Some Perspectives.

by Margaret Clark

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Authors in schools - some perspectives

(Paper presented at IFTE conference, July 2003 by Margaret Clark).

Margaret Clark is an Australian author of children's and teenage novels, having published over 100 titles since her first book was published in 1987. Currently she is completing a doctor of education in children's literature at Deakin University, Geelong, Australia. For further information please visit her web site at www.margaretclark.com

Introduction

Schools are sometimes part of an author's workplace, but most times are not. The author works at home in solitude to produce work. There are personal, social and economic reasons as to why an author ventures into a school, these being to meet their readers, to assist them to understand a particular text, to inspire the students to read more, to help the students improve their writing skills, to discuss the texts with the teachers, to ascertain the influence of their particular texts in the curriculum, to get feedback on their work from the teachers and students, to gain status and recognition, to increase book sales and to receive an income from such visits. Publishers often persuade authors to 'go on tour' to schools when a new book is realised. Agents contact authors seeking their involvement in literary festivals and special events. English teachers and teacher-librarians request visits, and students write to authors asking them to visit their classrooms. Professional authors sometimes have difficulty in leaving their home workplace due to pressures from publishers to meet deadlines and other family/business commitments. In summary, the author's school visits can be, to a degree, part of an author's workplace, depending on how many visits an author undertakes during a year. From the perspective of an author, the visits need to be fulfilling in terms of feeling valued and respected.

English teachers and teacher-librarians are seldom privy to the 'inside story' as related below in the email to myself from a fellow author, (pseudonym used) and my response.

Dear Marg,

Gorgeous time at Sharleywood: incredible relaxed friendliness, great audiences, wonderful gossip with other authors- if only it could always be like that! Suspect I'll now go off to the next one all happy and confident

and have another horry where I get lost, the room is booked for trumpet practice, the receptionist is doing an 'how to be a psychopath in three easy lessons' course and I catch the six different strains of flu from some snivelling kids. It really was a fantastic time at Sharleywood. But I have found I'm getting increasing- not nervous, that's gone - is it apprehensive? about talks. I can't sleep, in case I sleep in (probably because most mornings I can just sleep till I want to wake) and the most exhausting- mentally and physically- part of school visits is finding the place, then finding a parking place, then finding the front door, then attracting the attention of the receptionist, and then getting home again. Taxis are no better as they don't arrive half the time; or go to the wrong gate, or don't know where it is and demand I look up the street directory without my glasses on then go in circles for an hour; or say they DO know where it is when it isn't there and are too pigheaded to admit mistake. The worst is when I have the wrong instructions and I go to the senior campus in the taxi and the talks are at the junior campus and it's kays away and of course by then the taxi's gone off. Love, Jay

Dear Jay,

I love schools and the energy that the kids generate, but, like you, the mechanics of getting there wear me out before I start. I also toss and turn and keep waking up to look at the clock. The talking does not worry me in the least. Like you, it's the getting there! It's nerve-wracking trying to drive and look at the street directory and there's hardly ever any car-parking at the schools. And some don't have communal coffee or tea, and after driving from Geelong for two hours, I need a restorative. At my last school, the English teacher (who only drank herbal tea) was standing in the staff room shouting, 'Does anyone have some coffee they can spare?' as teachers scuttled back and forth to pigeon-holes or did their staff room thing. But more annoying yesterday was when the year sevens I was booked to talk to had gone off on a school excursion 'and now you're doing year ten.' It's okay for me, as I have the age range in books (and experience) but I know some authors just freak. However, it's not all about tea and scones with jam and cream. Some of the private school teachers are just so nice to me while they smile, show me their basket of freshly baked scones/muffins and then tell me that they know I'd be happy to do three double sessions, even though they know full well that only three single sessions were agreed upon in the agent's contract!

Grr. And they look so disappointed when I say no. Some of these schools seem to be after their pound of flesh!

But, Jay, there is hope! I have to tell you, last week I had the ultimate dream school in Melbourne. I finally found the school, drove through the gate, and there was a big sign indicating 'Visitor's Car Park' and another notice, with witches' hats, saying 'Reserved for Margaret Clark'. Then as I was hauling out my folio and books, a nice friendly man came down the steps, introduced himself, welcomed me to the school and carried my stuff past reception (where I was introduced to the receptionist who smiled brightly at me and even knew who I was) straight to the staff room where I was given coffee and cake. The room where I was to talk was set up with a microphone, display board with posters, racks with my books, a book seller seated at the rear of the room, kids all organised to buy books if they wanted and get them signed, white board, glass of water, flowers, chairs arranged with an aisle down the middle. By this time I was waiting for St Trinians type kids because it was all too good to be true! But the students were an absolute delight. They listened intently while I spoke, had read the books in class and had lists of intelligent questions to ask. I was very impressed. Hope your next school is as good if not better. Love, Margaret

1.2 The importance of authors' perspectives.

It can be illuminating for English teachers and teacher librarians to learn about the 'behind the scenes' stories of authors who visit schools so that they can understand the impact of a visit from the author's point of view.

Most authors arrive at the school, perform, and leave. They do not usually discuss their triumphs, anxieties, frustrations and other pertinent issues because they are trying to behave in a professional manner. Furthermore, a formal evaluation is seldom sought from the authors. From the school's point of view, it would appear that the visit is deemed a success if the author enthuses the students to read, explains the set text, expounds on where he/she gets ideas, or assists with the students' creative writing. Indeed, if the students are attentive and ask questions of the author, it is felt by all to be very successful.

What I believe might be gained from my research, particularly for English teachers and teacher-librarians, is 'inside information' about what authors think and how they

assess a successful visit. This can assist schools to ensure that the author visit provides optimum learning for all who participate.

1.3 Key research question

What factors make a successful school visit from an author's perspective?

1.4 Subsidiary questions

What are the authors expectations in regard to school visits?

What orientations/disorientations affect the author's presentation?

What factors show that authors are respected and recognised when visiting schools?

1.5 Selecting the authors

The first step was to ask a cohort of my colleagues if they would like to tell me their experiences. I did this by emailing them and requesting that they write me a short story about their school experiences. I felt that this would harvest the richest data. My assumption was that if I gave the authors 'free rein' to write about their own personal professional experiences as authors visiting schools, I would gain their valuable perspectives. I chose four authors, two male and two female, whom I had worked with in schools or at literary festivals, and who had vast experience as visiting authors in schools over a number of years. Also they were not all from Victoria, three being from NSW and one from South Australia, because I was interested to find out if experiences varied between State education systems in schools. (My own experience of author visits had found no noticeable difference as noted in my personal, professional journal).

In order to find out the authors' experiences, both positive and negative in schools, I asked them to email me their own stories. I asked for one narrative about a dream school (positive experience) and one narrative about a nightmare school (negative experience). From my own personal experiences, I was aware that between these two extremes are a number of other experiences that authors could write about, but I thought that through the description of one positive and one negative experience from each author, I would be able to analyse the narratives for key phrases and words within generated themes.

.The authors' narratives

The authors were contacted by email and all were asked if they could write an excerpt that best described the most desirable conditions for a school visits, and the least desirable conditions for a school visits. I suggested they write about their Dream Schools or Nightmare Schools, given that they had lengthy stories to tell, and I only wanted approximately narratives of a pproximately one thousand words. Within the Dream and Nightmare School stories, I hoped (without prompting) that the authors would discuss the issues that also concerned me as an author, these being expectations, orientations/disorientations and being valued and respected as professional authors.

Author A's Dream School:

When the teacher-librarian rings with the invitation, it's clear that she's familiar with your books and you are being invited personally, not just as any author to fill a book week or literacy week slot.

It's assumed you charge a fee and expenses, and this is handled professionally with a tax invoice required in advance, so you can be paid discreetly on the day, with the cheque in an envelope. Either a bookshop has been organised to supply your books for students and the library and you're asked to autograph them on the day or you're asked if you supply books for sale. Fine.

Not just 'entertainment', the author visit is part of a unit of work and you're asked to cover specific areas. You're asked how many students and how many sessions, and supplied with microphone, water and a 'minder' who greets you at the front gate. Your lunch is provided. Students have genuine questions as they have actually read your books. Questions like: 'If you had a dinner party and invited one of your characters, who would you invite?' You leave ideas for students to work on. Later, students send on their reviews and comments and access author web site. Teacher responds with a personal thank you letter about the ways the kids have benefited from the session. You're asked if it is okay for a photographer from the local newspaper to photograph you with the students, and this is done with a feature article written by students which also runs in their school newsletter. A courtesy copy is e-mailed to you later. They invite you back next year and you go.

This extract highlights the importance of organisation within the school, in particular, the planning stage before the actual visit. As a guideline for successful author programs, I suggest that the staff think about what type of event or program would be optimised at this particular school. Small groups in the library or large groups in the auditorium? Should the program consist of lectures or readings or workshops for student writers? When would be the best time for an author to visit? Without careful forward planning, the following can result:

Author A's School Visit from Hell ... Never again!

A vague request for a vague date. No confirmation until author checks. Amazed that an author requires a fee. Multi-campus school and room and campus changes at the last minute. No one to greet you. Heavy book case and demo material to haul from street park (car later booked by council) No help. Stand unattended for ten minutes in school office because 'all out to lunch'. Not welcomed into staffroom, ignored by staff ... thought to be a book rep. Venue is gym with no table for book, mike, terrible echoing acoustics , loud music next door from band practice and the sessions have been re-organised with no break and triple numbers because teachers are away sick today. (Often happens when author is visiting) 'This is okay for you, isn't it?' Use the wrong name when you're introduced. Students are not interested. Talk or fool around. Takes lots of energy (and voice) to get them interested, in between constant interruptions from monitors coming to drag away sports participants or kids with music lessons. One teacher sits up back and marks. The other yawns. The attitude is that it's a 'free' period for them. School and library have none of authors books and don't want to buy any. 'How much do you make?' is the only question. Why would you want to be an author unless you make millions was the student attitude. You have to ask for your fee, the teacher says 'that's more than I earn for a half day' and no-one is available to sign the cheque. No cheque prepared and eventually arrives for wrong amount, months later, after several follow ups.

It is obvious that either little preparation had been organised, or the organising person has worked in isolation and the benefits of an author visit had not been discussed at length. The physical surroundings had not been considered. The authors' books had not been read by the majority of the students. I suggest that teachers/librarians rouse

the curiosity of the student well ahead of the visit by reading to them from the authors' novels or short stories, and know the authors, their writing and the issues or concerns the authors write about.

Author A also requested that I include the following narrative which was referred to as the 'rude freebie visit', but which, in the end, had one benefit not anticipated.

As a personal favour to an 8 year old child whose teacher did not believe I had written a story about him, I agreed to be his 'Show and Tell'. His mother negotiated with the teacher for a time and date which suited the teacher. I agreed to talk to the grade and explain how I had written that book.

I arrive at the school 20 minutes before the afternoon session begins, the office is unattended and I'm left waiting until 2pm when school starts for the afternoon and the teacher returns from her lunch. I had not had lunch after a very busy morning elsewhere a long way from that school. Meanwhile, a student teacher invites me to sit in the staffroom. At 2 pm I'm taken to the classroom which has three classes (two extra) , and three teachers, (two extra) introduced by name, and invited to talk which I do for the 40 minutes. I include the child, but not too obviously. When question time comes, one of the teachers asks quite seriously if I saw in polar bears in Antarctica. I explain they were only in the North Pole. Then 'my child' is asked to thank me, on their behalf and escort me to the car. He gives me a thank you card and a present (organised by his mother). 'His' manners were beautiful and this is a child who is normally exuberant.

Annoyed by the school rudeness, I was prepared to write it off as a wasted afternoon, until his mother rang to thank me. 'It was so important to him. He has never been popular before.' The wasted afternoon had been worthwhile. Later, 'he' was given 'student of the week' for bringing an author to class. That mattered to him.

But it had cost me half a day of messing around to be at that school which is not local for me. I think some teachers need a course of basic manners.

My decision not to charge [a fee] , meant I was not valued.

But it was worthwhile for the child.

In this instance, there are separate agendas. Obviously the teachers were delighted that a 'free' author was coming, viewing the event as an opportunity to cram as many students in as they could to hear the author. The classroom teachers at the 'freebie'

school presumed that the author would be willing to talk to more students than arranged. If Author A had been consulted, no doubt the inclusion of the extra students would not have been an annoyance. Author A had made a special effort to visit this particular school, not charging a fee. Sadly, Author A felt devalued and 'used' after this experience.

Author B's Dream school:

Alliston Girls Grammar: I go there every year. About 120 girls who have read all my books, and studied one for a term; really thoughtful questions about why I used this or that literary technique or maybe a nice perceptive history question; cheque in my hand at the end and a big bunch of flowers; a library with great acoustics, so no microphone needed; comfy chair, table, jug of water with ice, whiteboard, and don't have to ask for ANY of it; a few really enthusiastic kids brought in to say hi beforehand and any kid who's blind, partially deaf etc so they can have a chat too as they may miss some of the nuances and need to feel loved; and no one had conniptions if I give a kid who can't see a hug or squeeze her hand; a cup of tea and a nice bit of something one of the teachers have brought in but no muggings by all the staff. Not one of whom asks exactly the same questions (where do you live where do you get your ideas etc) so you're out of breathe by the time you start with the kids... and the best thing about Alliston is that everyone- me, the kids, the teachers- really enjoy the whole afternoon and all feel like springing up and taking over the world at the end of it, it's so much fun and we get so much out of it- you know the kids have new insights, new techniques to use, ditto the teachers, and I have an insight into what the kids love or question and feel like writing another hundred book for them that evening.

That sort of school is a dream school.

Author B's narrative indicated that there is mutual benefit for teachers, students and the author when the students have studied the author's texts and have prepared some questions that are extrapolated from these studies.

An author's program can be a viable part of the school's attitude to both curriculum issues and the welcoming and hospitality extended to visitors to the school. For example, courtesy and appreciation were extended to the author at all times. The inclusion of students with physical disadvantages or learning problems who received

personal attention from the author showed that the teachers were 'in tune' with those students' personal and educational needs. From the consideration extended to both the author and the disadvantaged students, it can be assumed that this school values people highly and that belief system forms an integral part of the school ethos. Conversely, here is Author B's narrative of another school visit experience.

Author B's Nightmare school

Nightmare school? I got lost finding it. Teacher said later: Ooh yes, taxis can never find us, because this is UPPER Rabbit Flats and they all go to Lower. Refrain from muttering: why didn't you tell me then. Receptionist is talking on the phone, obviously personal, a friend. Ignores me. I am now five minutes late due to taxi circling for three quarters of an hour. (Tried to ring her but school phone engaged, probably due to conversation with friend). No chair to sit on, back killing me as I've had to lug my suitcase too up and down the school looking for the office. She finally deigns to notice me, puts call through to teacher. Teacher not there- in the hall of course waiting for me. I suggest this. 'Oh,' she says, 'why don't you go there?' 'Where?' I say. She gives directions. I lumber off, with bags, finally find hall, sweating and out of breath. There's grade one through to year ten and the problem learners class as well. No microphone. At least 500 of the 700 kids have coughs. After five minutes- and this is not a joke- the high school band comes in and starts to practice. I stop. They say Miss Prichard said they could and the competition is tomorrow. Teacher says vaguely, 'Well, you can cope, can't you?' I say no and I tell the kids to go to the library to practice as there is no one there; a bit stunned at the unexpected voice of authority they march off. I start again. At this stage one of the disabled kids in the front row starts to scream, on and on, not at me: it's part of the poor kid's illness, but no one takes him out or even to the side door. I keep talking. Kid next to screaming boy starts to cry. I stop, say, 'Honey, it's okay', then ask can someone look after her? Start again. After 15 minutes, and the kids are just starting to really get into it and become enthusiastic, all year six's have to leave for the sport's carnival. By now I am coughing due to voice strain. (will come down with laryngitis the next day; this leads to infection and I can't work for another week). Lawn mower starts up outside. Turns out only a few of the kids have read any of my books as the librarian- again no joke- doesn't like books taken OUT of the library, and my books are

too long to read in a sitting.

Then...no, I can't continue. too painful. Let's just say it included 620 scraps of paper (the year 6's have left), and I'm literally suffocating under the crowd and the teachers do nothing to help, and even though I yell 'All in a line', with 620 kids most can't hear me; teacher afterwards smiles nastily at me and says, 'Well, it's all right for SOME,' in reference to my cheque, ignoring the fact that she gets sick leave, rec leave, superannuation and doesn't have to travel for a day and half to get the said cheque, nor work half as hard for it ... AND I JUST WANT TO GO HOME

Author B also presented me with a list of the most common problems when visiting schools. When I read them, many were my common problems as well.

1. No microphone although that was stipulated when author agreed to visit.
2. 700 kids with bits of paper to sign - often twice for their best friend too (author wants to be available for kids with books to sign, or autograph books, or real questions to ask privately)
3. Authors need proper direction to get to the school- and office- some offices are hidden as the schools grow larger, and it takes a tracker dog to find them.
4. Outside noises ie lawn mowers, jackhammers, chainsaws, people mending the roof directly above, netball team outside the window.
5. Teachers or parents who gossip in the back row and disrupt the kids' concentration (this happens often- never have a problem with kids, but do with parents and teachers talking)
6. Miss Grimsby who yells out mid suspenseful moment in my talk- 'I've got my eye on you, Jim Blotter!'
7. Teachers who say, 'Well, good luck, I don't think you can get anything into this lot.' (Those audiences are invariably wonderful as the kids respond to something and someone new and interesting)
8. Schools who expect you to do a freebie even though none of the teachers have

done a day's unpaid work for anyone in the past five years: don't mind freebies for local schools ie I am a parent and citizen, or really needy schools, or ones I have close relationship with, or if a kid writes a darling letter and I offer: but it's my job, and I do it well, and if you don't argue about payment with your doctor, lawyer, gardener or ironing lady, don't argue with me.

9. Parents with babies who cry at full throttle and who jig them vaguely while I yell over them ... have full sympathy with yelling babies but on the other hand, have only one finite voice to yell with.

Author C's Dream School

I have been author visits to schools for over ten years. I don't expect to be treated like a movie or rock star - that would be totally inappropriate. But I expect to be welcomed enthusiastically by staff and students who are expecting me, so that it's worthwhile giving up my writing time, and travelling considerable distances to be there.

I make phone contact with the organising teacher some weeks before the visit to ensure that the students will be familiar with my books, and on the day of the visit, I assume that the students are there to listen, learn, and ask informed questions. At the conclusion of my visit, I need to feel that I have contributed positively to both the students' and the teachers' experience of books and writing, otherwise there's been no point to the exercise for them or for me. I value feedback about my books and enjoy meeting my readers.

Author C's Nightmare School

Nightmare! My worst case scenario involved arriving at a state secondary college in a major city after an hour's driving, to find that no one expected me. The organising teacher, who had sounded so enthusiastic over the phone, was away sick. No preparation had been done, I was kept waiting about twenty minutes with no offer of a cup of tea, while teachers and students were rounded up and assembled in a cold, over-sized gym, with poor acoustics and uncomfortable bench seating. It turned out that no one had ever picked up a book with my name on it, let alone read it. I had attempted to engage a hostile audience of 150 year 9 students who had no idea who I was and absolutely no intention of listening. Continuous chatter undermined my talk, couples held hands and kissed behind folders - the few students who were

interested found the situation as impossible as I did. There was no teacher intervention until right at the end when I announced that I had had enough and I was leaving - only then did the deputy principal come forward and announce that because of their rudeness the entire year would do a Friday detention. Such creative teaching really sealed my fate. It guaranteed that none of those students would ever pick up a book with my name on it. After such a demeaning experience, I phoned my agent and swore off visits to state secondary colleges for ever! Nothing I have heard from colleagues since has reversed that decision.

I have not questioned Author C as to the identity of the school, but a number of cameos flitted through my mind of nightmare schools with discourteous and unruly students. However, I would like to emphasise that some nightmare schools experienced by me and other authors have been from the private school sector, not just state secondary colleges.

Author D's Dream school

They send me a map, with advice on how long the drive will take, the best route at that time of the day and ask whether I need any special equipment. They call me the day before, just to check that everything's still all right.

Two students meet me brightly at the car park, take me to meet the principal, she says, 'You've got no idea how much we're looking forward to this!' She introduces me to the teacher who will be my host during the visit. The teacher shows me the toilet, then the display of books and welcome pictures the students have prepared in the library. She asks me if it will be all right to speak to two smaller groups rather than one big one. Two teachers accompany each group. The teachers are fully engaged with the talk and the students are too. The teachers ask questions during question time, just as the students do.

The teachers hold a lunch for me in the staff room and all sit round asking questions and talking about books and even apologise if they have to leave

when

the bell for playground duty goes. When I have to leave myself, several teachers say, 'I hope you'll come back again,' and the host teacher walks down to the car park with me. This is not a dream - it's real. Unfortunately, so is the nightmare school.

Author D's Nightmare school:

When I finally track down the library, and a student tracks down the librarian, she tells me that they forgot to send the note home to the parents about books. The publisher has arranged for a bookseller to come, but she sells five books out of the boxes she lugs in, because the kids haven't got any money. Three teachers and two hundred kids, chunks of concrete literally falling off the walls, the male teacher screaming at the kids till the veins bulge on his forehead, (I know why the concrete's falling), no heating, no microphone. It's so cramped that half the kids have to sit on the lino, where they pinch and shove each other constantly (yes, they're secondary students); the two female teachers sit in the back row - one knits and gossips, the other drinks coffee, marks papers and gossips, while in the front row the class lovers try every trick in the book - except one - to attract attention. And I try every trick in the teaching manual to involve them and stop the constant talk and giggling. When it's finally over, the knitter up the back says, 'Well, that went all right.' And I say, as politely as I can, 'Except for the lovers in the front row' and she says, 'Well, you could have done something.'

Problematic is an expectation that the author knows how to 'control' students. It must be a consideration when inviting authors, that many are not trained teachers, and even if they are, it is the school's responsibility to maintain control. Teachers who talked to each other or marked papers have been mentioned by other authors as well as Author D. Most successful author visits occurred when the teachers are involved as well as the students, and as Author D stated, 'the teachers ask questions during question time, just as the students do'. This type of teacher-behaviour then models appropriate behaviour for the students, in addition to the teachers showing an avid interest in the proceedings.

When interviewing the teachers for my research their responses regarding author visits were, in the main, positive. Some schools had experienced 'boring' or 'inappropriate' authors. Some authors had arrived late and thrown the schedule completely askew. When the author is late, the school routine is upset, but also the author is usually flustered, stressed and tense, as demonstrated by the authors' narratives in my study.



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